ORGANIZATIONAL DIVERSITY AMONG DUAL-MODE INSTITUTIONS*

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New Challenges for Distance Education

There are several different models for the organization of post-secondary distance education, ranging from the establishment of special-purpose institutions to the creation of formal consortia of universities offering distance programmes. In a great many cases, however, distance courses are offered by conventional universities that also serve traditional, on-campus students: the so-called "dual-mode" institutions. While providing distance education in this way has some advantages -- for example in terms of resources and prestige -- there are also inherent difficulties, which often go unrecognized by those responsible for administering the institution as a whole. The purpose of this paper is to identify some of the special problems of distance education in dual-mode institutions, based in particular upon experience at one Canadian university with a large on-campus enrollment and a substantial correspondence programme.

How effectively an institution meets the educational needs and expectations of its distance students may, in large part, be a reflection of its history. Universities tend to be conservative establishments, slow to move off in radically new directions, and often committed to traditional patterns of didactic teaching that rely heavily on lectures and formal examinations, geared to students who enter directly from high school and attend the institution on a full-time basis. The explosive growth in part-time studies, continuing education, and distance education is a relatively new phenomenon in Canada. So too is the increasing proportion of the student body made up by mature learners, who are of course older, may lack traditional academic preparation, but who also bring to their studies a broad range of life and work experiences. Few Canadian universities have consciously planned for this dramatic growth or organized their programmes and teaching methods to respond to the special needs and abilities of these new populations. This is generally true of the relatively small number of dual-mode institutions in Canada, most of which have been offering distance programmes for many years and are now faced with new challenges to their traditional methods of programme organization and course delivery.

Canada's Major Dual-Mode Institution

The University of Waterloo is one of Canada's younger but visibly successful newer universities. It finds itself with a number of problems in dual-mode teaching that, ironically, arise from some considerable achievements in pioneering innovative instructional programmes. For example, Waterloo was one of the first major institutions in the country to offer distance education courses when it began its correspondence programme in 1968. This initiative accorded well with the status of Waterloo as a university rather visibly out of step with nearly all its sister

*Paper presented at the 13th World Conference of the International Council for Distance Education, Melbourne, Australia, August 1985.

institutions -- caused mainly by its massive and unconventional co-operative (sandwich or work-study) system of undergraduate education. By the middle of the 1980s Waterloo -- almost by accident and largely unbeknown to most of its faculty and administration -- has become the major dual-mode university in Canada, offering more than 300 degree-level courses to some 6,000 students each term. With this status has come a host of challenging problems and opportunities. The remainder of this paper is devoted to a discussion of some of these issues. Although they arise from experience in one particular context, they undoubtedly have a wider significance for other institutions that offer both on-campus and distance programmes.

Problems and Opportunities

Ad Hocery. In many traditional institutions distance education began in a rather ad hoc way to fulfil an immediate need. (For example, at Waterloo the programme has its roots in an audio-taped set of lectures in Physics developed by two professors who were responding to the demands of students who could not attend on-campus classes.) Some programmes continue to grow without any thorough-going examination of the institution's reasons for offering distance courses or discussion of how such offerings reflect the overall institutional policy and educational goals (assuming the latter exist and have been publicly propounded and debated!). Among the relevant issues to be decided are whether distance education is to be a major or supplementary activity, whether it is to be aimed at a specific subset of students or simply anyone who wishes to enroll (for example will regular, on-campus students be allowed to take distance courses for credit?), and whether the commitment is for the immediate future or over the long term.

In most dual-mode universities (Deakin is a possible exception) distance education rarely becomes the major activity of any academic department, nor does it generally involve the energies of a politically powerful administrative unit within the institution. Hence its legitimacy is always open to question from more traditional academic units that see themselves as involved in "mainstream" teaching and research. Whether or not distance education is organized through a special division or school, or offered through traditional academic departments, the question of commitment is vitally important if the programme is to succeed. Such commitment must involve several levels: the institution, the school, faculty or college, the department, and the individual. Indifference at any one of these levels will jeopardize educational effectiveness. Similarly, there need to be appropriate administrative structures that allow for taking responsibility and determining accountability for effective programme delivery. In special purpose institutions this usually presents no problem, since distance education is the raison d'etre of the institution. But in dual-mode settings (especially, perhaps, where responsibility is devolved to the traditional departments) it is easy for administration of distance courses to be neglected.

Funding Visibility. In many dual-purpose institutions distance

education activities generate a considerable amount of revenue. For example, in Ontario the fees paid by students and -- more important -- government grants paid in lieu of each course registration are the same for on-campus and distance students, although the actual costs of servicing the latter are substantially lower. In many instances, however, the income generated by distance education activity is buried in central or faculty budgets, producing very real difficulties in effectively reflecting the importance and championing the needs of the distance programme. This may mean that, while government funds continue to accrue to the institution, they are siphoned off for activities seen by the academic community at large as more central to the purpose of the university, while the distance programme struggles to pry free sufficient funds to recompense distance instructors and tutors, and provide sufficient incentive to the best teachers to develop new courses or improve old ones.

The Invisible Distance Learner. Because distance education students are, by definition, physically absent from the campus, they generally have an extremely low profile at the university. For example, at Waterloo correspondence learners represent the equivalent of some 2,000 full-time students, which is greater than the enrollment in some faculties. And yet they attract lower financial resources, benefit from fewer support services, and are often seen as a marginal clientele for instructional efforts. This in turn may lead to the unfortunate perception (of and by distance learners) that they are "second class students", "back door learners" (to use Charles Wedmeyer's term) whose degrees are worth less than those of students who attended on-campus classes. The University of Waterloo has made strenuous efforts to avoid this image, for example by striving to achieve parity between on-campus and distance courses through use of the same curriculum, textbook, and equivalent final examinations. Yet the notion undoubtedly persists in some quarters that a degree earned by correspondence is inferior, and indeed some Ontario institutions refuse to allow students to transfer credit for distance courses.

Assumptions About Teaching and Learning. A great, and understandable, temptation for those who serve distance learners in a traditional university (instructors, administrators, and support-service personnel) is to assume that the learning needs of the distance student are identical to those of the student who attends classes on campus. For example, at Waterloo the underlying philosophy of the correspondence programme is to try and transfer as fully and closely as possible the classroom experience by means of audiotapes (which represent the lectures, even though they are specially prepared and recorded), textbooks, course notes (intended to be the equivalent of classroom hand-outs and material written on the blackboard or overheads), assignments (essays, book reports, etc.), and formal examinations (the latter are compulsory for all Waterloo's correspondence courses -- though, ironically, not for on-campus offerings).

While efforts to ensure parity of academic standards between on and off-campus courses are in principle commendable, the slavish imitation for distance purposes of the methods and materials used in traditional face-to-face instruction may be inappropriate.

Indeed, traditional forms of didactic university teaching (such as the lecture) have recently come under increasing attack for their failure to prepare students adequately for a lifetime of learning in real-world situations. It is interesting to note that some institutions, such as Deakin, have reversed normal practice by using materials prepared for distance courses as a principal resource for their on-campus teaching. This was probably a logical step for Deakin, which began as a special-purpose distance education institution. However, it raises the interesting question for dual-mode universities as to whether distance materials might be used to enhance regular course offerings -- perhaps to provide a means of encouraging more individualized or independent study, with in-class time devoted to discussion or tutorial activities, instead of simple transmission of information through lectures. This in fact might be a powerful incentive to faculty who are often hard-pressed to find the time and resources for the preparation and teaching of both on-campus and distance courses. The services of course designers -- now available in nearly all special-purpose institutions -- have greatly enhanced the quality of distance education. However, help with course design is not provided to many instructors in dual-mode universities, and indeed may be regarded with some suspicion or even hostility by those who have been lecturing for many years without any perceived need for expert outside assistance.

Student Support Services. As with teaching and learning approaches, there is often a temptation in dual-mode institutions to try and adjust traditional support services to the needs of distance learners, rather than establish entirely new mechanisms and devise special-purpose strategies. This may be especially true where responsibility for distance courses rests primarily with the departments, and administration of the distance programme is handled by a small central unit. Under such circumstances there is often resentment if the administrative office commands too many budgetary resources or moves into what are seen as "academic" areas, such as advising and counselling. At the same time, the departments themselves may have neither the ability, time, nor will to deal with the special needs of distance learners. Mechanisms that work satisfactorily for on-campus students (registration, libraries, study skills programmes, etc.) may fail badly when the appropriate services have to be delivered by mail or over the telephone, or when the individuals involved have no understanding of the particular situation and problems of distance students. One partial solution here may be to appoint individuals within the service units with special responsibility for the distance education programmes, but again their effectiveness may be hampered by the types of attitudinal and logistical constraints discussed above. Even identifying student perceptions of weaknesses in the programme may be difficult if evaluation techniques rely upon methods used for on-campus instruction. For example, traditional course evaluation questionnaires are unlikely to cover aspects of teaching and learning that may be centrally important for the distant student. Distance learners also usually lack access to more informal methods of communication with faculty and university administrators.

The Role of the Teaching Assistant. In most Canadian universities a very large proportion of instruction is carried-out by teaching assistants -- usually graduate students who serve as part-time tutors, laboratory demonstrators, and markers. In dual-mode institutions for all but the smallest courses it is common for such assistants to carry out a large part of the marking of assignments and examinations. As such, teaching assistants frequently form the main link between the distance learner and the university. Paradoxically, however, they may have little training in the basic skills of marking, advising, and counselling. The fact that this may apply equally to teaching assistants used in on-campus courses is small comfort to distance learners who, because of the relative lack of other support services, depends heavily upon feedback concerning their progress in the course -- for example via comments on assignments. It is clear that training in appropriate skills should be an essential prerequisite for an appointment as tutor/markers. At Waterloo some training for teaching assistants is provided on a voluntary basis; in other distance mode institutions it may be almost entirely absent.

Research. In dual-mode institutions the reward system for faculty is usually based upon involvement in traditional, discipline-based research. Instructors interested in conducting research on aspects of distance learning may run considerable risks to their career progress, and of course those who neglect research entirely to concentrate on teaching will also suffer, however excellent the quality of their courses may be. It is probably true that any type of applied research on teaching and learning is held in generally low esteem compared with mainstream scholarship in the instructor's discipline, and research on distance education is no exception. This may explain the relative lack of scholarship and empirical investigations in the field compared to other aspects of higher education. For example, there are very few journals devoted to distance education, and rather little in the way of a "theoretical base" for distance learning despite the considerable size of the enterprise world-wide.

Conclusions

The fact that this paper has raised far more questions than it has answered should not be taken to imply that there are no solutions to the problems identified here. However it is important to recognize the special circumstances of "traditional" universities offering distance courses, which often mean in practice that distance programmes may be a second-best activity. At worst this can have a demoralising effect on instructors involved in the programme and ultimately on their students. To correct this situation it is first necessary to admit that the problem exists. Without such a recognition and commitment of appropriate resources it may be better for the institution to concentrate on the central activity it feels it does well and abandon distance teaching entirely.